

Dr. Ervin's Dream House

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For: FairburyNews.net
Date: May 25, 2026

Many longtime Fairbury residents recognize the two-story house with the four massive front porch columns that still stands along Seventh Street just south of the Indian Creek Golf Course. This house is a familiar landmark that has watched the town grow and change for decades. What many people may not realize is that the house did not begin as the distinctive residence we see today. It started life as a plain, ordinary wood-frame farmhouse, and it was Dr. Ervin who transformed it into the recognizable home that generations of Fairbury residents have come to know.

In 2012, when he was 82, Dr. Ervin published his autobiography, ***A Country Doctor: Small Town Medical Practice in the Nineteen Sixties***. In his book, he tells a fascinating story about how he transformed the house and the Fairbury contractor who did the work.

The story of that transformation is closely tied to one of the most memorable medical emergencies of his career, when he was called upon to successfully treat the wife of the very contractor who was helping remodel the house.

In the early 1960s, Dr. Ervin had become well established in Fairbury. His medical practice was busy, and he had earned the community's confidence through years of dependable service. Like many families of that time, he wanted a comfortable, respectable home, but instead of building a new house, he chose to purchase an existing structure and renovate it. The old farmhouse was built circa 1892.

The building he acquired was a typical rural Illinois farmhouse — a simple two-story frame house with a straightforward design and very little decoration on a three-acre site. It had served its purpose well for earlier occupants, but it lacked the appearance and features that Dr. Ervin envisioned for his family. Rather than tearing it down, he decided to remodel the building and give it a more modern and attractive look.

According to the photographs in his autobiography, the original house had the plain appearance common to farmhouses of its era. The front of the structure was unadorned, and the exterior showed the wear that naturally comes with years of use. Dr. Ervin saw potential in the building and set about making improvements that would change its character without sacrificing its solid construction.

One of the most noticeable changes came at the front entrance, where he added a set of four columns two stories high that immediately gave the house a more formal and welcoming appearance. The addition of those columns transformed the structure's appearance, turning what had once been a simple farmhouse into a residence that stood out in the neighborhood.

Dr. Ervin designed the house improvements himself. He specified new wiring, heating, and plumbing. He wanted a large family room added to the back of the house, with a laundry room, bathroom, and screened-in porch. He also added a stable and a white-fenced pasture for his daughter's old horse.

Melvin Zimmerman (1920–2011), a well-known local contractor, was hired to carry out the remodeling work, and construction soon began. As the project progressed, neighbors noticed the steady transformation. The changes were gradual, but the difference between the original farmhouse and the remodeled home became more obvious with each passing week.

Then, in the midst of the remodeling, an unexpected crisis occurred.

It was not Melvin Zimmerman who became ill, but his wife. She suddenly became seriously sick, and her condition caused immediate concern for the Zimmerman family. In those days, even routine illnesses could become dangerous without prompt medical attention, and the situation soon appeared grave.

Fortunately, the family had access to a skilled physician.

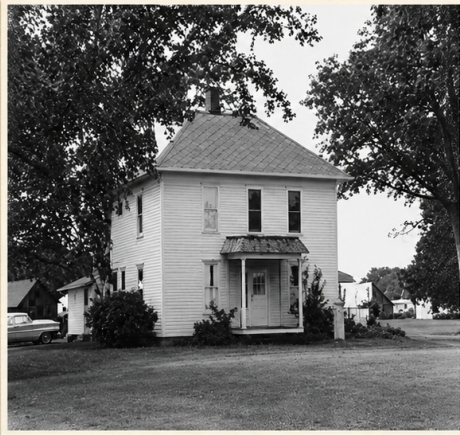
Dr. Ervin responded at once. Using the medical knowledge and practical experience he had gained through years of treating patients in the community, he carefully examined Mrs. Zimmerman and began treatment without delay. Those present later recalled the tension of the moment, as family members anxiously waited to see whether she would recover.

Through careful attention and determined effort, Dr. Ervin successfully treated her illness and restored her health.

In time, Mrs. Zimmerman regained her strength, and life returned to normal for the family. The remodeling work resumed, and the project moved steadily toward completion. For Melvin Zimmerman, the work carried special meaning. He was finishing a project for the physician who had successfully treated his wife, and his gratitude was reflected in the care he devoted to the job.

When the remodeling was finished, the house's transformation was striking. The once-plain farmhouse had become a comfortable and attractive residence. The addition of the four massive front columns gave the home its distinctive character, and the exterior improvements made it one of the more recognizable houses in that part of town.

Dr. Ervin and his family moved into the remodeled home in 1963. The family lived in that home until they relocated to Colorado in 1970. Patients visited, neighbors stopped to talk, and the house stood as a familiar presence along Seventh Street as Fairbury itself continued to grow and change.



— BEFORE – CIRCA 1960 —

In 1963, Dr. Ervin transformed his plain 1890s farmhouse into the distinctive four-column home still seen today south of Indian Creek Golf Course.



— AFTER – CIRCA 1963 —



Eventually, Dr. Ervin decided to sell the property. The buyer was a longtime Fairbury attorney, Harvey Traub (1930–2019), well known to many area residents. Traub practiced law in Fairbury for many years and earned a reputation as a capable and respected professional.

In addition to his legal work, Harvey Traub played an important role in shaping the community's development. Working together with Carl Borngasser (1937–2023) and J. C. Ebach, he helped develop the beautiful Timber Ridge subdivision located directly across Seventh Street from Dr. Ervin's former home. That development transformed the surrounding area into one of Fairbury's most desirable residential neighborhoods and remains a lasting contribution to the city.

Today, Dr. Ervin's house still stands, and many Fairbury residents recognize it immediately when they pass along Seventh Street. The distinctive columns at the front entrance continue to mark the improvements that changed a plain farmhouse into a lasting local landmark.

The story of Dr. Ervin's home is therefore more than a simple account of remodeling an old building. It is a story about vision, craftsmanship, and a physician's willingness to use his skills when they are needed most. It also reminds us that behind many familiar homes lies a story of people helping one another — and of lives changed in unexpected ways.

This article represents just a small sampling of the many Fairbury-related stories that are described in Dr. Ervin's book. A copy of his book can be reviewed at the Fairbury Echoes Museum. A PDF copy of his book can be viewed and/or downloaded from Archive.org using the Internet address of <https://tinyurl.com/4warcnsj>. Dr. Ervin's book provides a fascinating look at medical practice and everyday life in Fairbury during the 1960s and helps preserve an important chapter in our community's history.